

# Hiccup and the Starchasers

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Summary: In this sequel to "Hiccup's Mostly-Painless Guide to Training Children", Hiccup's troublesome trio of students and their dragons have accidentally uncovered stories and legends of the Starchasers, a supposedly mythical crazy tribe of Vikings who were obsessed with stars. But there may be some truth to the tales . . . and Hiccup is determined to uncover it.

## 1. Prologue

For a supposedly barbaric culture, the Vikings had several methods of labor assignments that have lasted throughout the ages. For example, if one of the villagers was incapable of fighting, he or she was instead assigned to looking after children. Since keeping said children in the village during a raid or invasion could be dangerous, the caretaker often took the children to a cave.

Before his grand adventure, Hiccup often was chosen as the caretaker. The logic of the older Vikings was that with such small children, so far from the battle, Hiccup surely couldn't do too much damage. So whenever wild dragons' fire rained down in the village or malicious vessels were spotted on the horizon, Hiccup could be seen weaving through the village, struggling to push a wheelbarrow filled with bleary-eyed children.

Hiccup's favorite cave system was the Ice Caves. It was a long trek there, but it was safe and relatively isolated. He would weave between cliffs and around huts, then up a small dirt road to the rickety old bridges. If the children had woken up at this point, they always whimpered and clutched at Hiccup's arms as they gazed down at the ocean far below them. Hiccup would habitually mutter reassurances to them, and by the end of the bridge, the children were breathing normally again.

Across the bridges was the Wild Zone, a place most of the younger Vikings had barely seen. Hiccup always picked up his speed in this

sylvan land. Wild boars and terrible terrors usually hid in every shadow, preying on any small creature they could sink their teeth into. Hiccup raced down the mountainside, white fingers gripping the wheelbarrow tightly. The children ducked beneath blankets and grabbed the wheelbarrow. They held their breaths, shuddering at the prospect of a red-eyed boar attacking their little troupe.

Finally, Hiccup would reach the beach. It was a calm, pebbled place that the boars and terrors tended to avoid. A few trees dotted the shore, and Hiccup would push the wheelbarrow behind them, just up to the stern granite face of the cliff. There could be found the entrance to the Ice Caves.

Hiccup always paused before he gave the all-clear notice to his charges. If he squinted a bit and strained his ears, he could hear the gruff shouts and fiery explosions echoing in the distant village.

"Okay," he'd whisper, bending down to speak beneath the blankets. The children always chose several different methods for exiting their wheeled haven. Some would simply wait until Hiccup set the handles down, then roll out the back quietly. Others would spring out of the blankets, shimmy up to the elevated front of the wheelbarrow, and leap down. Sometimes an infant would be in Hiccup's care. He usually had one of the calmer young girls take care of the baby, but every once in a while he would cradle the bundle in his arms.

The children, after spending their bursts of energy on a bit of exploring and chattering, would eventually flop down on the grainy cave floor next to Hiccup. Every once in a while, they begged for a story. Several fell asleep. A couple of the smaller ones — ones who had not yet copied their parents' repulsed, frustrated feelings for Hiccup — would snuggle up to the teen. They used his knees for pillows, his sides for the backs of chairs, his head for a perch for their chins. At times like these, Hiccup didn't hate his village so much.

On a good, clear night, Hiccup could see the stars. He would point out each one, and name it, and tell its story, until each child had been lulled into a sense of calm or sleep. A meteor shower would send the temporary inhabitants of the cave into dazed stargazers. Their eyes would all widen and sparkle as they watched streaks of light sweep across the dark blue expanse. Except for the occasional gasp or giggle, they remained silent. Simple things like these were the very best parts, as far as Hiccup was concerned, of his village.

Hiccup had been looking after the younger villagers since he was eleven. As the children grew in height and years, their infantile affection and respect for Hiccup morphed into scorn and mockery, or at least cold ignorance. After all, children are fine parrots of their elders. Hiccup tried to pretend he didn't care when the little boys who had curled up next to him in their youth chucked sticks at him and called him rude names in their supposed maturity, or the little girls who had braided his hair into twigs now ignored his very existence. But it still hurt.

One thing some of the children never lost, however, was a vibrant love for the stars. And, though well masked, most of them possessed a secret affection for the tall, skinny boy who had sat with them in the caves.

## 2. Chapter I

Stoick stretched again. He listened in satisfaction to the cracking of his neck as he rolled it around. The rain yesterday had most likely emptied the sky of any clouds " today might actually be pleasant. And, Stoick acknowledged with a grin, the better the weather the more good-tempered his village tended to be.

His beard twitched as he glanced up at the ceiling. Usually, he could hear his teenage son and said son's Night Fury stumbling around there. This morning, however, Hiccup's attic room was silent.

Was he still asleep? Stoick sighed. His son had a lot of work to do today. Last night Phelgma and Dorina came to him complaining that a few terrors had been snatching food off their tables. Hiccup would need to figure out a way to keep the terrors under control. So far, none of the villagers' methods had proved successful. Stoick hated to wake Hiccup, but there wasn't much choice.

Crouching down and squeezing his shoulder blades together, Stoick hopped onto the first step. It protested his bulk loudly, and Stoick rolled his eyes. "Oh come on, I've been slimming down!" The second step added to the first's whining when Stoick tapped it with his foot. Stoick's eyebrows furrowed and he rushed up the stairs, ignoring their wailing.

When he finally reached the landing, the hefty chief craned his neck to scan the room. Toothless was wide awake. He was watching Stoick with narrowed eyes and a small smile on his face. Stoick sighed. That dragon seemed to be picking up his rider's sarcastic attitude. "Yes, Toothless," he whispered, "I have actually been slimming down."

Toothless snorted. His head dropped onto his stony bed and he swept his tail around his body.

Stoick turned his gaze to Hiccup's bed. He let out a small chuckle. His son had tried to hide it from Stoick, but the chief was a warrior. He could hear the door squeal open in the middle of the night. But, to humor his son, Stoick tiptoed down the stairs as quietly as he could. Once he was at the table, Stoick sat down, perched his elbows on either side of his plate, and roared, "HICCUP! TIME TO GET UP!"

His ears perked as he listened to two bangs on the ceiling as two bodies fell out of the bed in shock.

"Will your dad get mad at me?" Stoick sucked in a laugh at the barely concealed whispers.

"No, of course not," Hiccup hurriedly replied. "Did you have any more nightmares?"

There must have been some reply, because Hiccup whispered, "Good. Okay, I'll go down, distract him, and you can sneak to the door behind him, okay?"

"Uh-huh," the voice whispered back.

There was a silence. Then: "Glad you feel better, Measles."

The little girl giggled. "Thanks, Hiccup. You're the best person ever."

Stoick busied himself in his breakfast as he heard Hiccup's metal prosthetic bang on the stairs. Seconds later, Hiccup appeared at his side. "H-hey, Dad," Hiccup said loudly, an overly wide smile plastered onto his face.

"Morning, son," Stoick replied. He heard the patter of the little girl's feet as she rushed across the floor. Hiccup yawned with a loud groan that only barely masked the squeak of the door. Hiccup's eyes darted to the door. His shoulders sank in relief, and he sagged into a chair. The morning had hit the teen full-force.

"What was the nightmare about this time?" Stoick asked, his face blooming with a grin.

Hiccup jerked up, mouth wide open no doubt to either deny or question. Then, with a roll of the eyes, he pulled a small loaf of bread onto his plate. "She was in a boat all by herself, and there was a Scauldron chasing her." Hiccup's eyebrows drew together in concern. Stoick smiled at that too. Valhallarama had the exact same expression when she was worrying over their young son.

Stoick stabbed a cooked fish with a fork. "When did it start?"

Hiccup shrugged. "A few weeks ago. She just appeared in my room, whimpering." He glanced at his father, half guilty and half defensive. "I couldn't just turn her away."

Stoick nodded wisely. "It's good of you to do that for her," he said. "She's taken it hard since her brother died in that storm."

Hiccup gulped and nodded, his eyes misty. Stoick shivered slightly. The storm a few months ago had torn the village apart, both physically and mentally. Several had died. The villagers were still recovering from the loss of homes and family members. Measles' household had not gone unharmed.

Stoick sighed. "You've got a full morning, son," he admitted, after emptying a mug of mead down his throat. "We can't live with the terrors anymore."

Hiccup groaned, rolling his eyes upward to stare at the knotted wood ceiling. "I know. I'm on it."

"Try to have Snotlout and the twins working with you," Stoick said. "When they have nothing to do, they tend to cause a ruckus."

"Believe me. I've noticed."

Stoick chuckled. After a few minutes of quiet eating, the large chief shoved his chair away from the table and stood up, brushing breadcrumbs off his clothes. "Well, off to work," he said, shooting a small smile his son's way. Hiccup glanced up and offered a smile of

his own.

"See you, Dad," he said. Then his head ducked down as he continued with his breakfast.

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